



THE BACKPACKER

JOHN HARRIS

summersdale travel

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To *everyone* on the 08.15 to Charing Cross.

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THE END

'... Big Balls is number one!' he shouted over the noise of the road. He had to shout, because even though we were riding in a Rolls Royce, the smoothest and most luxurious car on that road, it was a convertible, and even the world's best engineers could do nothing about the sound of rubber rolling against tarmac. Nor could they redirect the air as it ricocheted off the windscreen and blasted around the ears, which, like the rest of the human anatomy, were designed in the days when aerodynamics weren't a consideration.

'I know he's number one,' I shouted, sliding forward on the back seat and resting my forearms on the leather headrest in front. His long blond hair was flying horizontally in the wind and I had to crane my neck, pushing my head between him and the driver to see his face.

'I'm not disputing that. Big Balls is number one. Fact! What I want to know is: who was number two?' The Triad lookalike who was driving us glanced quickly sideways at me, as though about to offer the answer to my question, before returning his gaze to the road ahead. 'Don't know do you? You don't fucking remember!' I slid noiselessly back on the animal skin and folded my arms.

'Course I fooking do.' He bent forward to light a cigarette in the footwell, momentarily disappearing from view, before reappearing in a mass of hairy smoke. 'Joost give me time.' He paused, puffing vigorously to keep the cigarette alight, and looked at his watch. 'Fooking hell, can't this thing go any faster? I'm gonna be late.'

'Well it'll be your own fault if you are,' I said, and left a moment's silence for my statement to sink in before turning to my girlfriend. 'Apple, can you tell the driver to go faster, please?'

She leaned forward, one hand holding her long black hair against the wind, the other holding down her mini-skirt, and said something in Cantonese. The hum of the engine went up a pitch, throwing her back into the seat, and we rose on to the elevated carriageway into the full

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glare of the bright morning sunshine. Each of us turned on cue, as though attached to the same strings, and squinted at the shimmering harbour.

'Woo-hoo!' He stood up on his seat, one hand holding on to the top of the windscreen for support, sparks flying from his cigarette as the wind buffeted his face. 'Woo-hoo! This is it John, this is the day!'

'Wow,' I gasped, picking up my camcorder and starting to film. 'I've seen it a thousand times but it never looked like that before.' The harbour glistened in the sunlight causing me to blink against the magnified image in the viewfinder. As usual, the solitary government-sponsored junk was there, plying up and down for the benefit of tourists' cameras, but it failed to spoil the scene. The harbour was to our right, and the shining steel and glass skyscrapers on our left. It felt like we were sitting on a speeding, metallic-blue bullet that had been fired between the two. A bullet with beige upholstery.

'Woo-hoo! What a day it's gonna be!' He sat down, much to the driver's relief, and turned to face me. 'This is it, John,' he said breathlessly, sweeping his hair from his face, 'this is the day.'

I pressed the *STOP* button and lowered the camera. 'Are you sure you're doing the right thing?'

He hesitated, using one hand to shield his face from the sunlight, then nodded. 'Yeah, the compass says so.'

Afraid to show my emotion to my best friend, I turned away from him and looked out over the other side of the flyover. Below us, in a tennis court, a perfectly synchronised group of old ladies stood on one leg as part of their morning t'ai chi class like a well-groomed flock of grey-haired flamingos. My head turned slowly, pretending to be interested in the display, as we sped past one group and then another, before they were replaced by another blinding skyscraper and I turned back.

'You'd better have this then,' I said, reaching into my jacket pocket and pulling out the little mahogany box. The sunlight caught its brass corners and made them wink. 'Even though you can't remember who was number two, I'm gonna let you have it. But don't open it until after!'

THE END

He took it from my palm and shook his head pensively. 'It's been a long time John.'

'Mmm, and a long way.'

"'To Sir William George Garthrick Jenner,'" he read from the gift label, "'From Lord John'"

I wasn't born with a title, no one from south-east London ever has been, and he had never been knighted, as far as I'm aware they don't knight ex-North Sea fishermen, but we still have them, and no one can take them away. Even though the rules that tell us whether we'll be a worker or a player are made before we are born, some of us learn to jump from one to the other.

Nobody told me how to jump but I'm going to tell you because I've learned and broken free, in the same way that the other man in that car did. There is no way of telling his story without telling my own because they are the same. And if that sounds like a cliché then so be it; I don't know how else to say it.

We had come a long way. I don't know how many miles or countries; I lost count. It all started when I went on a three-week holiday to India.

That was four years ago . . .

REWIND

THE BEGINNING

ONE

'Beep, beep, beep, beeeep. This . . . is London . . .'

By the time the BBC World Service intro had started its signature tune I was already standing at the bedroom window with my camcorder, finger poised over the *RECORD* button. I pulled aside one end of the dusty curtains and looked through the viewfinder, closing one eye and squinting the other against the bright, early morning sunshine.

It was still only 01.00 Greenwich Mean Time according to the man on the radio, which made it six o'clock in the morning, I reasoned, Indian Time. I could have been wrong, I'd had virtually no sleep all night, but even through the electronically-relayed phosphorous image in my camera it looked like early morning outside.

On the street beneath me Indians were starting their day. I let my eyes wander down the road: from the two children directly beneath my third-floor window who were mercilessly teasing a half-starved kitten, past the Sikh man meticulously polishing his rickshaw, to the point where the road curved out of sight. The narrow street looked like a perfectly-formed concrete canyon, the brilliant blue sky a snaking band above the rooftops.

'This is *Goa*,' I mumbled, 'dum-tee dum-tee dum-tee-dum . . .'

'What are you doing John? It's so early.'

I didn't look around; instead ruffling the curtains and sending a small fog of dust into the air making me gag and cough slightly.

My girlfriend sighed again, more tiresomely this time. Opening my eyes and looking across at her briefly and then over to the corner of the room, I studied my surfboard, tucked into its protective travel bag. The words, *Fragile! Top Load Only!* written on a label and stuck on to the bag were peeling off like a wilting petal in the hot, humid air.

Sanita turned her head towards me wearily, looked at the surfboard

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and then back to me. 'I don't know why you brought that with you, I didn't know there was any surf in India.' She turned and rolled back on to her stomach with a huff, and buried her face in the damp pillow. I pressed the *STOP* button and lowered the camera. I was beginning to think she was right. Well, not beginning, I already thought she was right. Two minutes after stepping off the plane at Goa's International Airport it was crystal clear that she was right.

The airport in Goa was a mess, a joke. The previous Monday evening at about six o'clock I had arrived on a flight from London with Sanita, my fiancée, one surfboard and minimal cabin baggage.

The first thing that hits you when you step off the plane in India is the heat. The first thing should be the smell but that has already penetrated the welded joints of the aeroplane long before the doors have even been opened. The second thing that hits you when the doors do open is the sight of what appears to be complete mayhem. Not the usual airport sight: people boarding and disembarking planes. No. What you get in Indian airports is London Underground station in rush hour meets Third World Armageddon. There were at least a dozen different modes of transport available, from clapped-out trucks to rickshaws to cow-driven baggage cars. God knows what they were all doing on the runway.

Once we'd managed to get off the plane and fight our way through to collect my surfboard we discovered that all the cash Sanita had so cleverly put into her shoulder bag, which she had equally cleverly checked in as luggage, was gone. We tried to get some help to recover the money but it was hopeless. 'You put cash in luggage, no lock?' said the man at the information counter wobbling his head. 'Ohdearohdear.' I immediately saw his point of view and told Sanita to forget it. I had a Visa card anyway – an essential part of every traveller's kit. We picked up our gear and trudged off in search of transport into Umta Vaddo and a place to stay.

Umta Vaddo is a half-mile square area of Calangute beach that houses wall-to-wall guest houses, food-stalls and trinket shops. There's an Umta Vaddo in every Asian town: in Calcutta it's Sudder Street, Bangkok has

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Khao San Road, and Jakarta has Jalan Jaksa. All of them are different, in that it's a different country and language, but all of them are the same: serving the same variety of backpacker food, selling the same tie-dye baggy pants, and are home to the same variety of charmless concrete guest houses. We chose the Palmtops Hotel.

I let the dusty curtains fall limply back across the window, walked across the dark room and opened the door to the small fridge, retrieving my underpants from the icebox. This I looked forward to in the morning. In anticipation I kicked the fridge door shut with my foot and steadied myself, letting out a steady puff of air. Counting to three I jumped into them, both feet at once, gasping as they came into contact with my groin. 'Ahh, lovely.'

Sanita clucked loudly.

'You should put your knickers in there at night,' I said. 'It's brilliant.'

She sat up in bed, the damp sheet sticking to her back with sweat, and eyed me vacantly.

I don't know how, but I knew exactly what she was about to say. Maybe it was the way her eyes dropped slightly and then came up to meet mine; maybe it was the shape of her mouth, drooping unhappily at the corners. She leaned over on to one elbow and ran a single finger between her breasts, like a windscreen wiper on a car, wiping off a layer of sweat and studying the water dripping from her finger. 'John,' she said, looking up at me, 'I want to go home.'

If the airport was a joke the train station was worse. Sanita, upon seeing the mayhem, had refused to even go into the station building and had decided to wait outside. The place was full of beggars, thousands of them, in various stages of collapse and decay. I found the way in which they spotted a target, a potential source of funds, from far across the station hall and then moved in for the kill was quite amusing, and while I queued for the tickets south I had plenty of time to watch exactly how they operated.

As soon as a tourist entered the station concourse they would pounce

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from all four corners, steadily bearing down on their prey. It was essentially a race. It reminded me of a scene from the film *Aliens*. In it the creatures are steadily moving in on two of the commandos who are hemmed-in inside the ventilation ducts. The rest of the frantic crew are watching the appalling events unfold on a TV monitor which shows a dozen or so luminous green dots converging on the unlucky victims.

I watched through the fuzzy image in my camcorder as another tourist, oblivious to the impending danger, studied his guidebook for some clue as to how or where to buy the correct train ticket. The resultant look of shock on their faces was always the same: one minute they would be calmly thumbing through the pages, the next they would jump back with fright as they felt the stump of a beggar stroking their bare legs.

Amongst the beggars at the station there was a sub-group who always got to the subject first and therefore won the race. These were the skaters. Without legs, or at least without the use of their legs, they had constructed small four-wheeled trolleys, a bit like square skateboards, on which they propelled themselves along with their hands or stumps. While most other beggars had to be content with dragging themselves laboriously from one side of the concourse to the other, the skaters would fly across, bobbing and weaving in and out of pedestrians as they went, steel wheels screaming against the concrete floor as they shot towards the intended target.

'Sir?'

I was so engrossed that I couldn't place the loud knocking sound in my ears.

'Sir? Please, sir.'

I lowered the camera and turned to face the clerk.

'Your tickets please, sir.' He rapped on the glass screen that separated us and pointed at the counter.

'What?'

Sliding the two tickets under the chipped glass, he wobbled his head.

'Two tickets. Please, sir, there are many people waiting, thank you.'

I glanced behind me at the snaking line of angry faces. 'Oh, yeah,

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thanks.' Sliding the tickets off the greasy counter I checked them, flapping the hem of my shirt with one hand to dry the sweat. The heat in the concourse was stifling, sticking my shirt to me like an extra skin. I'd drunk two bottles of water at breakfast and had mostly sweated them out already but I still needed to go to the toilet. I figured I could kill two birds with one stone: freshen up and pee.

'Is there a toilet in here?' I asked, turning back to the counter. The clerk, without looking up from his timetable, lazily raised an arm and pointed to the right.

Slipping the two damp tickets into my pocket, I pushed through the crowd and walked towards the corner of the building. I didn't need a sign to know where the toilet was situated; the rank smell of sour piss and shit, and the cloud of flies hovering over a stagnant pool in the doorway were all the direction I needed. I would have turned away and waited until we were back at the guest house but I was desperate. 'Hold your breath,' I told myself, 'and go in.'

As I walked towards the entrance of the toilet a small turbaned man who had been standing in the doorway moved slightly to one side, and seemed to nod to someone. He could have been dislodging a particularly annoying fly from a nostril, anything's possible, but with the benefit of hindsight I choose to record it as a nod. Hindsight's like that: one always remembers tiny details, even if they didn't exist. I think the brain must invent them subconsciously to fill in the gaps.

Anyway, he nodded and I walked past him into the stinking concrete box. The floor was four inches deep in water, which came dribbling from a waste pipe in one corner where a man stood washing a tin bowl. I tiptoed in and turned into one of the cubicles, stopping at the entrance. There was no door, and I figured that I could probably aim the jet from three feet, thus avoiding stepping in the piles of shit that had been dropped all around the hole in the floor like bombs that had missed their intended target. I was just about to undo my zip when I felt a tap on the shoulder. I quickly pulled my hand away and turned around.

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I remember gasping and sucking in a fly as soon as I saw the knife. A knife!

'What?'

The man who held it to my chin was the same one who'd been washing the bowl. I know that because as soon as I jumped back in shock and stepped in shit he dropped the tin bowl on the floor with a loud *clang*. He moved forward to cover the step back that I'd just taken and pushed the six-inch blade back into my throat. I couldn't breathe! I tried to swallow but my Adam's apple got stuck on the knife edge. 'Ah, ah, ah ...'

Instinctively I tilted my head up, but I could still see his face.

And I can still see it now, writing this. He had a small, almost spherically round head, like a little football. He had wispy black hair that was greased down and clung to his forehead like running ink, almost as though someone had spilt a pot of it on to his head and turned him on his side so that each run became a thick black curl. The smallness of his head was accentuated by bulbous eyes, ping-pong balls rammed into his sockets, each one blood-red from years of alcohol abuse. As he opened his mouth to speak I got a whiff of booze and saw his few rotten teeth, stained red by betel.

'*Money! Money!*' he screamed, holding out a shaking hand and tapping the fingers against the palm.

The room swam as I came to the brink of passing out. A droplet of sweat trickled backwards along my hairline before running down the back of my neck. Tilting my head higher as he pushed the blade in and looking down my nose at him, partly because my movement was restricted and partly because I was a foot taller than him, I swallowed carefully and put both hands into my shorts pockets. The money I had in them seemed to jump into my palms, and I clenched each fist and pulled them out slowly.

If anyone ever says that they were held at knife or gunpoint and refused to give up their money, they're either crazy or it's bullshit. The fear of the moment is so intense that it's impossible to speak, or even move, or do anything other than what's instructed. Even then it's hard to

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move a muscle. It would be easy for me to waffle on now about how my mind was torn between giving him the cash and giving him a swift kick in the bollocks, but those thoughts only come after the event. I didn't even register the stink of shit any more. The only reason I know I stepped in it was because it squeezed into my sandal and I found it later. My life didn't even flash before my eyes!

What happened next is engrained on my memory.

The image of a white leg, with a leather sandal on the foot, flying through the air and striking the Indian on the side of the head is imprinted on my mind like a single frame from a film. My brain's camera froze the picture in the split second before the foot came into contact with the side of the Indian's head.

The poor guy didn't know what hit him. His head went over like a boxer's punch-ball on a spring as the foot struck his face and he was sent tumbling to one side. He was immediately followed by the body of the person attached to the leg: a mixture of tie-dye shirt and hair that went sailing past the doorway and landed with a splash on top of the Indian.

I stood, stiff and totally unmoving except for my eyes, both fists clenched in front of me, still holding out the money.

'Go!' ordered a voice.

'Eh?'

He picked himself up off the Indian and grabbed my shirt collar. 'Come on, go!'

Still incapable of making a decision I stumbled forward, dragged by the man, and splashed my way out of the room, back on to the station concourse. Only then did I hear my heart pounding as the blood rushed back into my ears and surged through my body. I opened my parched mouth and filled my lungs with warm air, coughing out the fly.

'*Fooking* Indians!' the man said angrily, wringing out his T-shirt. '*Fooking* India! You OK?'

'I, um, yeah ... think so.' I blinked, and suddenly seemed to come round.

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'Yes, I-I'm OK,' I said, unclenching my fists and staring down at the crumpled rupees.

'Not worth being mugged for, huh?'

'No,' I said blankly, 'it's not. Thanks. I-I don't know what . . .'

'It's OK.' He waved a hand through the air. 'Listen, I've got to go to pick up my plane ticket. Don't hang around in here. Follow the compass . . .'

Plane ticket? This is a railway station! Compass? What compass? I was just about to ask him what he meant when he started to walk away.

'Maybe see you later,' he called back. 'You're staying at the Palmtops, right?'

I nodded vacantly.

'Me too. Catch you there later.'

I watched the lurid orange tie-dye circle on the back of his T-shirt merge into the crowd as he jogged away and shouted, 'What's your name?'

But he was already gone.

TWO

When I finally got back outside to where I had left Sanita, she was gone. Shit, I thought, why does she always have to wander off at the wrong fucking time? I stood on the spot for a few minutes, perspiring and trying to steady my heartbeat. Just down the entrance steps from the station stood an ice cream vendor who'd been there when we arrived an hour earlier, and was still shouting at the top of his voice. Beside the vendor a small group of people had gathered, apparently looking at the ground. Curious, I walked over to take a look.

Sanita was sitting on the floor in the middle of the group, holding her head. She saw me and started crying.

'What happened?' I asked, bending down and putting my arm around her back but at the same time scanning the crowd for any sign of a tie-dye shirt.

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'John,' she cried, sobbing harder and self-consciously pushing her skirt down below her knees, 'I fainted.'

'You haven't seen a traveller around here wearing . . .'

'John!'

'Fain— How?'

'How'd you think?' She glared at me, tensing her jaw to hold back the tears. 'It's too hot!'

Ten minutes later we were riding through the streets in a clapped-out old rickshaw, Sanita at one end of the back seat, sulking, me at the opposite end. We arrived back at the hotel but she wanted to go into the centre of town to get 'something nice to eat'. I leaned forward and spoke through the perspex sheet that separated the driver from the passengers.

The driver looked over his shoulder briefly, told us that he knew just the place, and floored it. We sped forward with a jerk. 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4: four gears, four seconds. The handlebar clutch depressions were a blur to the human eye, the only way to detect the gear changes was from the glint of the driver's ringed fingers in the sunshine each time he clenched and then straightened his chubby hand. Every time we cornered, one of the two rear wheels left the road momentarily and we were thrown from one side of the tin box to the other.

The driver's view, front and rear, was almost completely blocked by trinkets, deities and other objects dangling from mirrors, and the windscreen contained a stick-on, blue-tinted sun-strip top and bottom, so that only a pillbox-sized area of clear glass could actually be seen through. He may as well have had his eyes closed.

'How much you pay?' the driver barked, and at the same time took a corner, leaning into the bend the way a motorcycle racer leans his bike over when cornering.

I thought quickly, calculating the distance in my mind. 'Twenty,' I said, leaning with him as we came out of the corner.

He shook his head. 'No-no-no, pay twenty-five.'

'No, it only costs—'

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Sanita sighed loudly. 'John, just pay the man, for Christ's sake. Five rupees!'

I thought for a moment and then agreed, slumping back into the seat, sulking.

We screeched to a halt outside a Western-style restaurant that served, I'd learned a few days earlier, the best ice cream, milk shakes and burgers in town. Another reason for being dropped here was to change money. I had established over the past week that the best black market exchange rate for foreign currency was obtainable right outside the bookstall just up from the restaurant.

Changing money on the black market was easy and, despite the guidebook's advice to the contrary, was not a risky business. At least ten percent could be gained over and above the current bank exchange rate by simply pretending to be interested in one of the books on sale on the bookstall next door to the restaurant. I gave Sanita my food order and walked off to pretend to buy a book.

'Change money? Dollar, pound, yen, what you have?'

'Pound Sterling,' I said to the man loitering around the paperbacks. 'Fifty.'

We haggled a little, went through the obligatory laugh at each other's audacity routine and finally agreed a price.

The restaurant was crowded, as usual, and the air conditioning was freezing heaven. The sweat chilled and then dried, leaving my T-shirt stuck to my body. If the weather outside was ever cold the restaurant would have no business; most people would eat Indian food from the street stalls. Customers often lingered there for hours, taking outrageously small sips from their milk shakes just to stay out of the heat. It always looked like booming business, but for all I know the same people had been sitting there since breakfast-time.

Sanita had already ordered when I entered, and was sitting in one corner, idly flicking through her food tickets. She hadn't seen me walk in so I decided to stand to one side for a while in an attempt to collect my

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thoughts. I was hidden from her by the few people queuing at the ice cream counter, and when they shuffled forward every time a customer was served, I ambled alongside, pretending to be interested in ice cream.

Sanita looked shattered, utterly exhausted. Her face looked pale against the brightly coloured vest she wore, and her hair, usually one of her physical charms, was hanging limply across her face, stuck to her forehead and cheeks with dried sweat.

She hadn't even wanted to come to India in the first place, but had finally agreed just to be with me. I had convinced her by bombarding her with pictures from tourist brochures at our high street travel agent, and I think my enthusiasm eventually just wore her down and she succumbed to the unrelenting pressure.

Since arriving in Goa the previous week she had suffered from an upset stomach almost from day one, constantly needing to go to the toilet. At one point she had spent almost the whole day in the room, only leaving once to buy some medicine from a nearby chemist. Even that short errand across the street to the shop outside the hotel had turned into an ordeal, in which she rushed out fitfully into the burning midday sun, bought the goods and then ran back, sweating and clutching her stomach, to the safety of our toilet.

I had always imagined that she would feel completely at home once we arrived in India, and that all her fears would be put to the back of her mind. After all, I reasoned, she was of Indian descent. My reasoning was ridiculous. Although her parents were originally from India she had been born and bred in London, and, to make matters worse, had never even been on holiday abroad before.

The ice cream queue shortened again, and I stood still to look across at my fiancée. As the teller called out another food order number and Sanita blinked and wearily stood up to collect the food, I moved from my statuesque poise and walked over to the table and sat down.

I waited for her to return with the food and start eating, before saying, 'I got fifty to the pound, not bad huh?'